



ERM INSIGHTS

Positive Safety - Is Your Organization Ready to Look at Safety From a New Angle

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Abstract

In increasingly complex work environments, safety becomes more than just the absence of accidents. Managers are challenged to identify and build on what works well, and employees need to make situational, safe decisions. It should be acknowledged that today's approaches to safety management do not always instill positive emotions in workers, or managers. Although the goal of safety is unequivocally defined as "going home healthy at the end of each workday", routinely repeating this mantra has done little overall to foster positive thinking about safety. Instead, remarks such as "Safety...oh yes, these horrible safety moments we need to have at the beginning of each meeting during which we discuss the emergency exits..." heard in a recent conversation may be more indicative of how many people, including both employees and managers, actually feel about safety in their daily lives. To really achieve lasting change in an organization's safety culture, it is worth approaching safety in a new way: "Positive Safety".

Positive Safety - Is Your Organization Ready to Look at Safety From a New Angle

In recent decades, approaches to achieving the goal of zero industrial injuries have been increasingly characterized by sometimes extensive management systems built on rules and procedures. Seemingly at odds with this, many industries nowadays rely on highly skilled workforces for whom safe work practices are ideally an engrained part of their skillset. For many engaged managers and safety professionals, there is a growing dilemma in the tendency of organizations to view safety as a formalized set of rules and procedures applied in a work environment that also requires employees to make safe, situational decisions in complex, non-textbook (scenarios). There is an increasing perception that these systems and procedures do not always live up to expectations, and that they may even create burdens that inhibit an organization's ability to look at safety in a positive, engaging way.

It should be acknowledged that today's approaches to safety management do not always instill positive emotions in workers, or managers. Although the goal of safety is unequivocally defined as "going home healthy at the end of each workday", routinely repeating this mantra has done little overall to foster positive thinking about safety. Instead, remarks such as "Safety...oh yes, these horrible safety moments we need to have at the beginning of each meeting during which we discuss the emergency exits..." heard in a recent conversation may be more indicative of how many people, including both employees and managers, actually feel about safety in their daily lives. To really achieve lasting change in an organization's safety culture, it is worth approaching safety in a new way: "Positive Safety".

In addition, there are still managers and safety professionals who believe that unsafe employee behaviors are the source of all (or most) evil and that the majority of accidents are caused by employees who are just careless.

What Does "Positive Safety" Mean and How Is It Different?

Safety Instills Positive Emotions

The goal of Positive Safety is to talk about safety in a way that instills positive emotions beyond the basic goal of going home safely at the end of a workday. While "going home healthy" remains the key objective in Positive Safety, positive emotions are centered around meaningful and tangible aspects of employee empowerment (on an individual basis) and organizational care (on a collective basis), rather than around "avoiding having an incident".

Safety Is “The Presence of Positives”

Many organizations still monitor safety mainly in terms of what is going wrong – counting accidents, incidents, near misses, unsafe behaviors or unsafe conditions. Even replacing lagging indicators (such as accident statistics) by leading ones does not remove the fundamental implication of this approach, i.e., that safety is defined through (the absence of) negative events.

In “Positive Safety”, organizations instead identify the positive aspects that make them safe, and thus characterize safety by “things that go right”. Safety becomes the presence of positives rather than the absence of negatives. The ability to have effective systems to gather, analyze and use safety data based on “things that go right” poses new challenges which require new ways of thinking as well as new ways of obtaining meaningful information.

Positive Safety Means Enabling People to Make Situational, Safe Decisions

In many working environments, “Golden Rules” for safety have been established which apply regardless of the situational context. Establishing such Golden Rules makes sense when defining expectations for employee behaviors with regard to typical serious workplace hazards. In exemplary organizations, these Golden Rules are established based on reliable organizational measures and technical equipment that enables workers to follow the Golden Rules in an efficient and effective way. A typical example is investing in the installation of fixed fall prevention measures such as guards and railings wherever this is feasible, rather than relying on personal tie-off in all situations.

In increasingly complex environments, Golden Rules are only able to cover certain standardized situations. Employees at the sharp end, however, constantly have to make situational decisions about safe working methods, which go far beyond what could be defined in a simple Golden Rule. In Positive Safety, organizations can develop the competence of workers on the sharp end and empower them to make situational, safe decisions. To ensure that this competence becomes organizational knowledge rather than remaining individual expertise, organizations can implement intelligent programs to assess, develop and share competencies. This will include advanced mentoring and coaching approaches, in contrast to classical classroom training exercises which are still predominant at many companies.

Positive Safety Means Investigating Why Things Go Right

A fourth but equally important aspect of Positive Safety is establishing a new way of looking at event investigations. Investigations of “bad” events such as accidents and incidents are often prone to outcome bias (“measures were inadequate...”) and hindsight bias (“predictably...”), which can be significant barriers to real learning from past events. Positive safety strives to overcome these barriers by identifying and analyzing exemplary events that go well and using this information to become better at identifying signals, indicators and baseline requirements for safe performance. When performed by mixed teams of shop-floor experts, supervisors and HSE

experts, such investigations can provide a real basis for effective and positive organizational learning.

The Road to Positive Safety

The figure below outlines the process for embedding Positive Safety as “the” approach to safety thinking within an organization. It follows a four-stage approach, with initial kick-off and exploration phases followed by the design of a roadmap with individual, tailored steps and activities to drive employee engagement, empowerment and organizational learning. The implementation phase or “deployment” can be adjusted and tailored to the specific needs of an organization and can be integrated with other, existing approaches or programs.



Looking at safety from this new angle will help accumulate individual skills into an organizational culture defined by making situational, safe decisions. It will help drive a safety culture characterized by empowerment, involvement and continuous learning.

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